Alzheimer’s disease and related forms of dementia remain a major problem for our aging society. Currently, more than five million Americans are diagnosed with Alzheimer’s—at great cost to individuals, families, and the health and long-term-care system. While the past twenty years have seen advances in understanding Alzheimer’s disease and caring for patients, no breakthrough treatment has emerged.

Some of the most promising research on Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias these days is taking place through the National Institute on Aging’s Alzheimer’s Disease Research Centers program, a network of researchers and clinicians who work together at 31 centers across the country to develop and share new research approaches and findings. For a perspective on this work, The LearningEdge turned to Peter Lichtenberg (pictured at right), a nationally renowned researcher and clinician who is director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University. The university is part of the Michigan Alzheimer’s Disease Core Center, along with the University of Michigan and Michigan State University. The Michigan ADCC is the newest in NIA’s centers program, having received its funding in 2016.

“This is a fantastic opportunity," Peter Lichtenberg said. He noted that the core center will support a wide range of studies and will educate scientists, healthcare professionals, and the public about causes and treatments. "Not least,” he said, “citizens of Michigan can benefit directly as they grapple with understanding and intervening for people with Alzheimer’s.”

A common core. "We are creating a popular common-core set of knowledge," Lichtenberg said. "It’s what every researcher in dementia should know, from basic science to clinical, and also including health services.” Junior research scientists receive training in this core along with mentoring. Lichtenberg is one of the core training leaders.

Integration. Lichtenberg said he looks forward to a deeper integration of Alzheimer’s research with geriatrics and other programs across the university, to develop new lines of research. "For example, we are already working with Wayne State’s Healthier Black Elders Center to advance understanding of dementia in underrepresented minorities," he said. "It’s going very well; integrating them into the research plan goes along with having a true connection with the community when they need it."

Scientific perspective. Each of the core centers addresses Alzheimer’s and related disorders from a different scientific perspective. While most research examines the disease with a focus on beta-amyloid, the protein that forms the plaques that characterize Alzheimer’s, the Michigan ADCC will look at other potential causes. "Nothing is really working on the amyloid front," Lichtenberg says. "Some people have many tangles in the brain but never have a day of dementia. Researchers are now realizing that we need to dig deeper and farther. Beta amyloids are necessary for development of Alzheimer’s disease, but they are not sufficient. This evidence frees us to be open to a broader range of possibilities."

“And of course,” Lichtenberg says, “we must use what we know to improve treatment, support, and
New CADER Course: Alzheimer’s Disease and Other Dementias of Aging

Alzheimer's disease poses one of the greatest challenges to our aging society. In this self-paced online course, you’ll develop the skills you need as a provider of supports and services to older adults and families facing dementia. The course is based on the principles of person-centered care and incorporates the latest research and best practice in assessment, referral, and intervention. Visit the CADER website for more information or to sign up (use code ENEWS2017 for a 10 percent discount).

'I feel I have so much more to offer my clients and families now. Thank you.'